CULTURE · COLONIAL HISTORY · LAW

Tolerated, but *Not Accepted*

Queer identity, imported faith, and the unfinished rights of the most Catholic nation in Asia.

A SYNTHESIS / READING NOTES

A single contradiction sits at the heart of queer life in the Philippines. Few societies in Asia are as visibly, warmly at ease with gay and gender-nonconforming people in everyday life — and few keep them so completely locked out of the law. The affection is real. The recognition is missing. Understanding how both can be true at once means following a thread that runs back more than four centuries, to a time before the faith that now governs the question ever arrived.

01 A Reverence That Came First

Before Spanish ships arrived, many of these island cultures organized spiritual and political authority around figures called *babaylan* — shamans who healed the sick, communed with the spirit world, and held genuine standing in their communities. Crucially, a great many were not conventionally male or female. Some are described in early accounts as transgender women or as effeminate men, known in the Bicol region as *asog*. Their gender variance was not merely permitted. It was understood as a *source* of spiritual power, something closer to sacred than shameful.[1,2,3,4]

A trace of that older worldview survives in language itself. The modern Filipino word *bakla* is commonly traced to a fusion of *babae* (woman) and *lalaki* (man) — a linguistic echo of a third category that existed comfortably between the two, long before anyone thought to call it a problem.[3,5]

02 The Colonial Rupture

Spain governed the islands for more than three centuries, and Catholicism was the instrument of that rule as much as any army was. The old spiritual system was dismantled deliberately: the shamans were suppressed, their authority erased, and gender was forced into a rigid two-part mould that left no room for the figures a pre-colonial world had revered. What had been sacred was recast as sin.[1,2]

The strangest part is what came afterward. The imposed religion did not stay foreign. It was absorbed so completely into national identity that the Philippines emerged as one of the most devoutly Catholic countries on earth — roughly four in five Filipinos today — arguably more so, in practice, than modern Spain itself. The faith outlived the empire that delivered it, and became the people's own.

03 From the Altar to the Parlor

Stripped of spiritual standing, gender-nonconforming life did not disappear — it relocated. Over generations it found relatively safe harbor in a narrow set of spaces: the beauty parlor, the salon, the pageant stage, and eventually mainstream entertainment, where the gay comedian and the flamboyant television host became fixtures of national culture. Visibility was preserved, but on conditional terms: be seen, be adored, be funny — from behind the camera or the styling chair, not from the bench or the pulpit.

> *"Tolerated, but not accepted."*
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> HOW FILIPINO SCHOLARS DESCRIBE THE ARRANGEMENT

That phrase captures the whole dynamic. People will laugh warmly with a queer television host, trust a gay stylist, treat a gay relative with genuine affection at the family table — and none of that warmth converts into legal equality or full standing as authority figures. The acceptance rarely extends to seeing queer citizens as judges, doctors, teachers, or parents. It stays in the realm of the personal and the performed. What looks from a distance like acceptance is, on closer inspection, tolerance — something more like oppression that has simply lost its teeth. It grants visibility while leaving every system of recognition untouched.[3,5]

04 The Legal Standstill

Nowhere is the gap starker than in law. The Family Code defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman, and there is no same-sex marriage and no civil-union framework to stand in its place. The absence is not abstract: it means no inheritance rights between partners, no shared insurance, no authority to make a medical decision for the person you have built a life with.[6]

The proposed remedy for at least part of this — the *SOGIE Equality Bill*, which would simply outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression — has become a case study in political paralysis. Introduced in some form for more than twenty-five years, it is now the longest-pending bill in the country's legislative history, reintroduced and rejected almost as an annual ritual, blocked in the Senate on grounds of religious and academic freedom.[7,8]

In the workplace, protection is a patchwork rather than a guarantee. There is no clear national statute naming sexual orientation outright; instead a scattering of instruments — the Safe Spaces Act, the constitutional promise of equal protection, and local ordinances in cities such as Quezon City — offers uneven, hard-to-enforce cover. In one United Nations study, roughly *thirty percent* of LGBT Filipinos reported being harassed, bullied, or discriminated against at work.[9,10] The cracks do occasionally admit light: a Supreme Court ruling in early 2025 allowed same-sex couples to jointly own property.[11,12] But marriage itself remains firmly off the table.

05 "It's a Catholic Country"

Pressed on why none of this changes, the most common answer is a single resigned phrase: *it's a Catholic country*. But that sentence describes why change hasn't happened; it does not argue that it shouldn't. The two are easy to confuse and worth keeping apart.

The evidence for the distinction is that other deeply Catholic nations have legalized same-sex marriage regardless. Ireland did it by popular referendum; Argentina did it years ahead of much of the world. A devout religious majority, on its own, does not automatically foreclose equality — what has been missing in the Philippine case is political will, not theological permission. The shrug is understandable as a way of coping with something that feels immovable. It is not, in itself, a justification.

06 Openness by the Numbers

There is a measurable footprint to all this everyday openness. In one large international survey, the Philippines recorded the highest share of adults identifying as LGBT+ of any country polled — ahead of even the United States and Thailand, which followed just behind.[13]

11% of Filipino adults identified as **LGBT+** — the highest share of 31 countries in a 2025 Statista Consumer Insights survey; the United States and Thailand followed close behind at 10%.

The figure deserves careful reading. It almost certainly does not mean more Filipinos are gay in some underlying sense — researchers generally treat the actual prevalence of sexual orientation as fairly stable across populations. What the number really captures is *willingness to say so out loud*. A more repressive society could hold the same hidden percentage and report a far lower one, simply because people are afraid to answer honestly. Read that way, the statistic is a thermometer for social climate, not for orientation — and by that measure, the Philippine climate is genuinely among the most open in the world.

07 The Thailand Mirror

The country sitting just behind in that survey makes an illuminating contrast. Thailand's *kathoey* tradition is arguably even more prominent in daily life and entertainment than Filipino *bakla* culture — yet the two nations arrived at very different destinations. Thailand was never colonized and is overwhelmingly Buddhist, not Catholic; it carries no imported faith policing the question. And in 2024 it paired its long-standing visibility with an actual legal breakthrough, enacting marriage equality.

That is precisely what throws the Philippine situation into relief. Both societies built a deep, affectionate public familiarity with queer life. Only one has so far let that familiarity become law. The Philippines is left holding the visibility without the follow-through — the warmth of Thailand's culture, but not its recognition.

THE LOOP

Set end to end, the arc is a strange one. A faith arrived as the tool of an empire, was used to suppress the very gender-fluid figures a pre-colonial world had held sacred, and then — generations after the empire itself was gone — was embraced so completely that it now serves as the reason to deny those same identities their rights. The oppressor's religion outlived the oppressor, indigenized fully, and turned to police the ground it once conquered.

What remains is a nation that can love its queer citizens dearly and still refuse them equality without feeling the contradiction — because affection was never the thing being withheld. Recognition was. And tolerance, however warm, is not the same as being accepted.

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